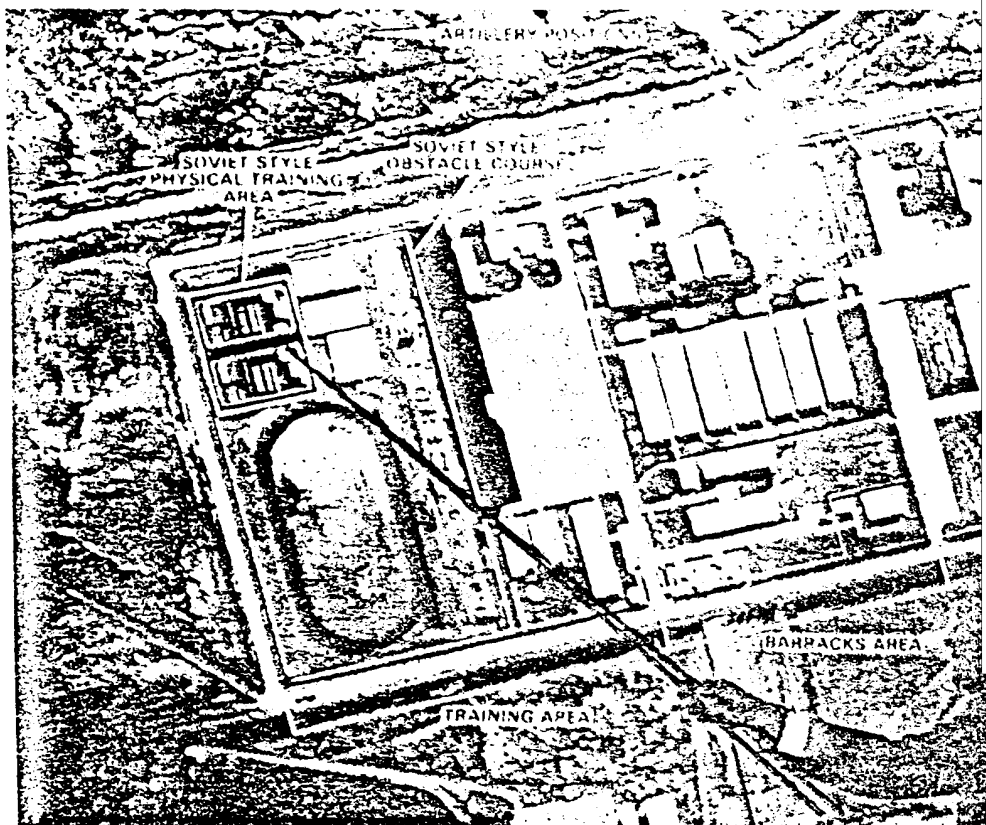


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Bruce Hoertel

Hughes points out a military installation: Longer and louder alarms about communist meddling in America's backyard

Taking Aim at Nicaragua

The lights dimmed, the projector beamed and the screen filled with blown-up aerial photographs that conjured up an earlier time of confrontation. Before a packed house of reporters, John Hughes, the photo-intelligence expert who presented the evidence in the Cuban missile crisis twenty years ago, took a pointer last week and made the Reagan Administration's case against Nicaragua. Flipping through the grainy photographs, Hughes said the Sandinistas have built 36 new military installations in just two years. He pointed to new airfields, lengthened runways and a dramatic array of Soviet-made tanks, truck-drawn howitzers, helicopters and amphibious ferries. He showed Nicaraguan troops in training and put the total number of men under arms at 70,000—the biggest and most threatening army in Central America. "Who is helping the Sandinistas do this?" he asked. "The fingerprint we find, in every case . . . [belongs to] the Cubans."

The carefully orchestrated show-and-tell session was the most successful element in a ragged propaganda blitz last week. The offensive seemed to reflect the Administration's growing frustration over the limits of its ability to act in Central America. Neither Congress nor the public seems inclined to accept Reagan's warnings about communist meddling in the region. The public mood has all but ruled out direct military intervention.

As a result, the Administration has found itself with few alternatives other than sounding ever longer and louder alarms.

It was hard to say what the alarm bells foretold. Washington seemed to be playing a high-stakes game of psychological warfare designed to keep the Nicaraguans, Cubans and Soviets guessing about Reagan's ultimate intentions. One possibility was that the Administration was hoping to use its evi-

The Administration launches a frenetic propaganda campaign that leaves troubling questions unanswered.

dence to enlist other Latin American nations to help cut the flow of arms to Salvadoran leftists. Looming behind it all was the prospect of a darker plan: a CIA proposal to help paramilitary groups cut the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador.

There was no doubt about the earnestness of the Administration's concern, but its media campaign raised as many questions as it answered. While the photo evidence demonstrated that the Sandinistas had been far

from candid about the size of their military buildup, nothing in the declassified material showed a direct conduit of arms into El Salvador. "I think most people were ready to believe that the Nicaraguans are building up their army," said one U.S. official, "but that was never the problem."

The Administration hoped to make the Nicaragua-Salvador connection with a parade of witnesses from the front—but the first step went disastrously awry. The State Department invited six reporters to interview Orlando José Tardencillas Espinosa, 19, a Nicaraguan captured in El Salvador. Tardencillas had "confessed" earlier that he had been sent to the war zone by the Sandinistas. But when the tape recorders started rolling, he stunned the reporters—and U.S. officials—by suddenly taking back everything he had said. He described himself as a free-lance revolutionary and said he had been tortured and beaten into collaborating with El Salvador and Washington. "The day before I came, an officer from the U.S. Embassy told me what I should say," he said. "He told me they needed to demonstrate the presence of Cubans in El Salvador. I was given a choice. I could come here and do what I'm doing—or face certain death."

Tardencillas's bizarre turnabout left the Administration in a bind. For weeks officials had been hinting that they had top-secret intelligence data on the Sandinistas'

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